

(Washington, DC)— In big cities, suburban neighborhoods and rural towns, the Fourth of July is a time of celebration. It's a time to commemorate the birthday of a great nation and reflect on our own fortune at having the opportunity to live in a country grounded in the values of freedom and equality.

Overseas, in Iraq and the Afghanistan, our brave servicemen and women are still selflessly serving every day. Over the last eight years, their sacrifice has been immense, and the Fourth of July is a time to honor their brave service. Many of these men and women will bear the scars of their battles for the rest of their lives.

According to a RAND Corp. study, more than 300,000 of the approximately 1.6 million U.S. troops who have been deployed in support of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq currently suffer from post traumatic stress disorder or major depression. But only 53% of those returning troops who met the criteria for PTSD or major depression sought help for their condition within the past year.

PTSD is a serious affliction that requires the same serious treatment as all war-related injuries. It is with shock and pain that I share the story of one of my constituents, for whom help came too late.

My constituent, who will remain anonymous, was recruited by the Army, given a more than \$5,000 signing bonus, and shipped off to combat in Iraq. When his unit returned, it was sent to Fort Campbell, Ky., to be discharged. Although other unit members were allowed to go home, my constituent was not discharged for months. In the interim, there was some evidence to suggest he was using drugs as a form of self-medication to cope with symptoms consistent with PTSD.

Ultimately, my constituent received an "other than honorable" discharge because of his alleged drug use. The designation made him ineligible for any Veterans Affairs benefits, including psychiatric benefits, and allowed the Army to reclaim its initial bonus - although the money had already been spent. When he finally returned to Milwaukee, my constituent was depressed, without job prospects and facing debt. Tragically, he had many of the classic symptoms of PTSD, and although he tried to get help, he had no access to a VA medical facility to confirm a diagnosis and receive care because of his "other than honorable" discharge.

Within six months of his discharge, my constituent committed suicide.

His death left our community wondering if mental health services from the VA would have prevented this untimely tragedy. While it is too late for my constituent, it is not too late for the thousands of servicemen and women who will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in the months ahead.

I have been an outspoken advocate of a provision to prevent our service members from being cut off from VA benefits without first receiving care. This provision was included in the National Defense Authorization bill that passed the House of Representatives last month.

It would forbid the services from involuntarily separating - or giving a "less than honorable discharge" - to any service member deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan who is either diagnosed as experiencing PTSD or is asserting the influence of such a condition until after that service member has received a medical screening. This would then give the military service the flexibility to make a final decision about whether a service member is engaging in questionable behavior as a result of PTSD.

Our service members make serious sacrifices and have serious needs. On the occasion when we celebrate our country's liberty, it is important that we remember the men and women who stand on the front lines, and remember the consequences they face as a result. This July 4, take the time to thank our men and women in uniform for bravely working hard to defend this nation's proud tradition and to remember what they may be sacrificing as a result.

Gwen Moore represents Wisconsin's 4th District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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